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# School principals' diversity ideologies in fostering the inclusion of Muslims in Finnish and Swedish schools

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## ABSTRACT

Mainstream scholarly approaches to improving equity in education, including culturally responsive education, promote multicultural recognition of diversity and abandon color-blindness as an ineffective strategy. The social psychological literature affords a more nuanced understanding of the merits of different diversity ideologies. However, these research strands rarely address religion. It is vital to study the actualization and influences of different diversity ideologies with respect to different forms of diversity and different contexts. This study analyzes Finnish and Swedish principals' diversity ideologies in fostering Muslim inclusion. The principals rely mainly on color-blind ideology, but assimilation into the secular normativity of the school is also commonly pursued. Multicultural ideology commonly applies to linguistic diversity, while Islam is excluded from the multiculturalist discourse. Reflexivity regarding the complex dynamics of recognizing individual vs. group identities in education as well as understanding of the implications of religion-blindness is called for.

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Diversity ideologies; culturally responsive education; religion-blindness; school principals; Muslims; Finland; Sweden

## Introduction

Much of the research on the development of educational equity in culturally diverse contexts has been conducted under frameworks, which emphasize multiculturalist recognition and respect for diversities. Currently relevant approaches such as culturally relevant and responsive education (e.g. Gay 2010) and critical multicultural education (e.g. Nieto and Bode 2008) push beyond color-blind thinking, affirm the backgrounds of all students and utilize diversity as an asset in order to empower all students, promote social justice and close the achievement gaps. The existing literature amply illuminates the drivers and barriers to the development of culturally responsive classrooms and school cultures (see e.g. Ullman and Hecsh 2011; Lustick 2016; Wynter-Hoyte et al. 2017) yet the vast body of evidence of the impact of these educational approaches is missing (Sleeter 2012), and very little has been written about the particular dynamics concerning their implementation in the case of religion. Both color-blind and multicultural ideologies continue to influence programs and policies for dealing with diversity in education (see e.g. Stuart Wells 2014), and enquiry into the justifications of the underlying ideas of these different educational approaches is

needed. Social-psychological knowledge on the flaws and benefits of different diversity ideologies (for reviews see Rattan & Ambady 2013; Rosenthal and Levy 2010) can provide important insight for this task.

Principals' significant role in promoting equality, social justice and inclusion in schools has been acknowledged and studied under different theoretical frameworks; *culturally responsive* is among the most consistently employed terms in this body of literature (Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis 2016). The core idea is that culturally diverse contexts demand culturally responsive teaching, but transformations need to happen in all aspects of education in order to respond to the challenges facing marginalized students (Gay 2010). Principals have access to power and can become transformative agents in challenging inequalities in educational communities. They can develop and prepare the school staff and promote an inclusive and welcoming school climate for all students, tasks that presuppose development of the critical self-awareness of the school leader (Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis 2016; Lopez 2016). In a culturally responsive school leadership framework school leaders' behaviors are evaluated against the standard whether they are able to 'identify, protect, institutionalize, and celebrate all cultural practices' from minoritized students, and colorblind ideology is seen as antithetical for the development of inclusive school environment, for it disturbs the possibilities of appreciation and affirmation of diversity (Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis 2016, 1278). Occasionally this argumentation takes the form of circular reasoning but evinces no evidence of the benefits of affirmation of diversity. However, studies have also associated color-blindness with principals' inability to acknowledge and counter racism and other forms of student marginalization (Mabokela and Madsen 2005; Touré 2008).

The social psychological research literature (see e.g. Rattan and Ambady 2013; Rosenthal and Levy 2010) promotes a finely nuanced understanding of the impact of the different diversity ideologies for social relations. The present qualitative case study draws on this strand of research when analyzing Finnish and Swedish principals' ideals and practices of leading multicultural schools and supporting Muslim inclusion. The article does not rely on any specific normative definition of inclusion against which the diversity ideologies would be evaluated but uses the term to indicate the absence of any form of implicit or explicit exclusion experienced by Muslims in Finnish and Swedish schools. The analytical framework of the present study is composed of three commonly identified diversity ideologies: multiculturalism, color-blindness and assimilation. The focus is on how the principals aim to promote inclusive school climates; other leadership roles, such as instructional leadership, are not addressed. The research questions are:

- (1) What kind of diversity ideologies do the principals endorse and implement?
- (2) What diversity ideologies do they apply for the inclusion of Muslim students in particular?
- (3) What kind of differences are there in the diversity ideologies of Finnish and Swedish principals?

In what follows I discuss the three diversity ideologies in more detail, present the contemporary issues of inclusion of Muslims in education in Europe and introduce the Finnish and Swedish contexts. Then, after presenting the data and methods of the study, I report the

results by analysing the emergence of each diversity ideology in turn and, as a pervasive theme, discuss how these ideologies are implemented with respect to different forms of diversity. In the discussion section I reflect the results in light of the social-psychological research results concerning the impacts of these diversity ideologies and discuss their implications for further research and educational practice.

### **Assimilation, color-blindness and multiculturalism**

People relying on color-blindness believe that focusing either on the uniqueness of every person or emphasizing similarities across groups of people, and disregarding group categories, is the best way to fight against prejudices and stereotypes and promote inclusion. Conversely, advocates of the multicultural strategy promote the recognition and maintaining of cultural identities, and see learning about and from diversities as the most efficient way of reducing prejudice. Unlike multicultural and color-blind ideologies that both aim to fight against inequalities but with different strategies, assimilation aims to protect the majority culture and may entail abandoning minority group identities (Rattan and Anbady 2013; Rosenthal and Levy 2010). Assimilation has proved to be the diversity ideology with the most negative effects on intergroup-dynamics: it is associated with greater ethnocentrism and stereotyping and does not have positive effects to compensate for these; furthermore, it is rarely supported by members of minoritized groups (Van Oudenhoven, Prins, and Buunk 1998).

Social psychological experimental studies have demonstrated the benefits and weaknesses of both multicultural and color-blind beliefs. In some studies, color-blindness has been associated with less ingroup bias and less stereotyping than multiculturalism (Wolsko et al. 2000, 2006). The kind of color-blindness that emphasizes similarity and the creation of a new common 'we' is sometimes conducive to the development of social cohesion (see e.g. Gaertner and Dovidio 2000). However, at the same time it hampers the recognition of bias and discrimination and therefore fails to fight against existing forms of marginalization (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers & Ambady 2010). Harsh criticism of color-blindness comes from scholars who observe its consequence in natural settings and as a larger socio-politic phenomenon. Where color-blindness has become a normative ideology, it seems to naturalize the identity of the dominant group, maintain its privileges and legitimize inequalities in a way that has led to it being regarded simply as a form of racism (Andersen 2003; Bonilla-Silva 2015). Furthermore, not recognizing group identities sometimes entails that people are compelled to act in a way that compromises their self-definition, which hampers the development of self-esteem and solidarity (Hopkins and Blackwood 2011). Members of dominant groups more commonly advocate color-blind ideology, while minorities prefer multiculturalism (e.g. Ryan, Casas, and Thompson 2010). However, multiculturalism is sometimes experienced as threatening by those members of minorities who do not identify strongly with their group (Verkuyten 2009). Maybe the most critical aspect of multiculturalism is that it can lead to more stereotyping, and among minorities it has been observed to strengthen ideas of the homogeneity of the dominant outgroup (Wolsko et al. 2000; Wolsko, Park, and Judd 2006; Ryan, Casas, and Thompson 2010); on the other hand, however, it can counter negative stereotypes through making visible the contributions of different groups. It is known that individuals rarely hold only one

diversity ideology; however, there is a lack of studies on the variation in diversity ideologies situationally or with regard to different forms of diversity (Rattan and Anbady 2013). Knowing these strengths and weaknesses of the different diversity ideologies, Rosenthal and Levy (2010) argue for the need also to develop balanced educational approaches that maximize the benefits and minimize the shortcomings of different diversity ideologies.

### **Muslim inclusion in education**

Religion is a category of diversity that is at the center of many current diversity debates. Yet, the abovementioned educational frameworks rarely pay attention to religion, nor does the social psychological research on cultural diversity (Verkuyten 2007). However, religious identities may be more non-negotiable than other identities, and the incorporation of religious diversity into secular societal and educational settings without encroaching on religious liberties raises many questions that are negotiated in the everyday lives of schools – and the most difficult cases have been considered by international human rights courts. For instance, the nature of the religious education curriculum in Norway and minorities' right to exemption from the subject were dealt with by the UN Human Rights Committee (Andreassen 2013). Religion is increasingly recognized as an equality strand that has to be protected against discrimination alongside other factors of diversity e.g. gender and sexuality (Catto and Perfect 2016). Muslims, in particular, have been regarded as the critical case of multiculturalism in many liberal societies (Modood 2014). In Europe, Muslim identities are commonly assumed to rival national identities and democratic citizenship, although evidence countering these perceptions has emerged (Grundel and Maliepaard 2012). The discrimination and Islamophobia experienced by Muslims in the West and also in the context of education has been much studied (see, e.g. Bleich 2011; Welpy 2017; Wang 2017), and problems of the essentialization of Muslim identities are well known. In the post 9/11 world this essentialization has often taken the form of a discourse that distinguishes between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, and in which 'good Muslims' are similar to us and share our values and lifestyle, and non-modern 'bad Muslims' are our enemy (see e.g. Mamdani 2002; Schwartz 2003).

Liberal educational values entail an ideal of neutrality and a preference for education that does not promote socialization to any particular value system (Halstead 1996). However, many European countries have recently implemented measures to educate students who have internalized national values that have attained an untouchable and almost sacred position and take precedence over cultural values. This means that the more a religious individual's values are tightly connected to sacred non-negotiable truths, and the more these values contradict national values, the fewer opportunities this person has to be taken seriously and participate in the democratic decision-making processes (Himanen 2012). In the field of education, criticism of the secular normativity (or religion-blindness) of schools and the liberal-secular foundation of multicultural education have started to emerge. In the Nordic context, for instance, scholars have criticized the othering of non-secular and non-Western worldviews in educational thinking and practices (see e.g. Poulter, Riitaola, and Kuusisto 2016; Berglund 2017).

The majority of Muslim students in Europe are educated in public schools, which is often considered the best way of promoting integration, even though there is only little research on how integration is promoted in these different types of schools. The fact that some Muslims want their own education invokes suspicions among non-Muslims: Islamic education in the West has even been accused of being a possible cause of Islamic radicalism and hindering the integration of Muslim students into society, even though these arguments are not based on any research evidence (e.g. Meijer 2009, 24). Furthermore, the experiences Islam and Muslims not being appropriately recognized have resulted in the willingness to found Islamic schools, also in Nordic countries (Larsson 2009; Leirvik 2009). The suspicions of some Muslim parents toward public schools are difficult to overcome because Muslims are rarely presented on the school staff, parents' associations or among educational authorities in European schools (Maréchal 2002). While Muslim families view Islam as cultural capital, schools may view it as oppressive and a hindrance to students' academic achievement (Ghaffar-Kucher 2014). In some studies, pupils from Islamic countries have been reported to achieve lower educational performances than other immigrant students (Dronkers and van der Velden 2013); however, the reasons for this have only been speculated.

### **Finnish and swedish contexts**

Unlike settler societies such as the USA, where multiculturalism is deeply ingrained in the national self-understanding, many European countries have a history with a dominance of one ethnic group and have experienced multiculturalization through immigration much later (Verkuyten 2007). This is also the case in Finland and Sweden, Nordic countries that are becoming increasingly multicultural, albeit a little later and at a slower pace than some of the most multicultural European countries. Although Finland and Sweden are highly secularized countries, the majority of the population belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The present combination of Protestantism and secularism in these countries could be called 'secular Lutheranism' (Poulter, Riitaoja, and Kuusisto 2016). They are countries with traditionally high levels of social trust, but currently experiencing polarization through increasing social, economic, ethnic, and cultural divides. Sweden has a longer history of immigration and a larger immigrant population: Muslims in Sweden account for approximately 5% of the population (Larsson 2015), while the corresponding figure is 1% in Finland (Pauha 2015). In both countries, the Muslim population is heterogeneous with no dominant ethnic groups.

Both Finland and Sweden have been ranked as countries of 'strong multiculturalism policy', (Multiculturalism Policy Index 2010) but there are gaps between official multiculturalist orientation and its implementation in practice. Furthermore, Sweden in particular has experienced a backlash of multiculturalism policies with the state taking less responsibility for immigrants' cultures (Byström and Frohnert 2017, vii). Multiculturalist orientation has also replaced assimilationism in educational discourses. There are efforts to meet the cultural needs of different groups in schools; both countries provide mother tongue instruction in the public school system, and Finland also provides religious education 'according to students' own religion': Muslim students also receive Islamic religious education in school. However, unlike in Sweden, there are

no Islamic schools in Finland. In both countries the vast majority of the students study in mainstream public (not faith-based) schools. Protestant-Christian holidays are included in school calendars, and Muslims commonly have to make an application if they want to have a day off during the most important Islamic celebrations. Scholars have noted similar tensions in both countries: strong ideals of ideological neutrality in education prevail, while educators regard the mediation of fundamental national values based on liberal Protestant secularism as an important educational aim (Rissanen, Kuusisto, and Tirri 2015; Berglund 2013). Non-religious positions tend to be regarded as 'normal' or 'neutral', while religious positions are seen to be in contradiction with modern, rational and independent thinking; on the other hand, the hegemony of the 'secular Christian' position also sometimes becomes othering towards purely secular views (Kittelman-Flensner 2015, 115–120; Poulter, Riitaoja, and Kuusisto 2016). The Swedish national curriculum even continues to describe Swedish identity to be based on Christianity and Western humanism.

According to a recent comparative analysis of the current curricular discourses in Finland and Sweden, the Finnish national core curriculum employs a strong non-essentialist discourse of multi-layered cultural identities by articulating diversity as a feature of all students and national identity as multicultural, while the Swedish national curriculum is surprisingly silent about diversity, and makes a distinction between the students' 'own origins' and the 'common heritage' (the latter including 'basic values of Swedish society') in a relatively essentializing manner. Furthermore, the Swedish curriculum posits the students' cultural background as a potential hindrance to the students' education, and advises school personnel to resist these hindrances (Zilliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm 2017). Both Finnish and Swedish curricula recognize various markers of students' identities, and forbid discrimination based on them in education. However, there is a trend towards referring to students through their language identities, which can also be interpreted as an attempt at political correctness and avoiding the ambiguous concept 'multicultural student'. Religion is mentioned as identity factor understood to be tied to certain traditions (Zilliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm 2017). It seems that multicultural education in both Finland and Sweden is mainly understood in terms of increasing language participation, and no other barriers than language to achievement are recognized, which is a common trend in the Nordic context (Osler and Lybaek 2014). In contrast to the color-blind tendencies and avoidance of such terms as cultural identity in the Swedish curriculum, the Finnish curriculum is markedly multiculturalist in its orientation and demands that all students' cultural and religious identities be recognised and supported (Zilliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm 2017). In practice, however, color-blind ideals of concentrating on commonality and restricting religion to the private sphere have been found to be common among teachers in Finland, too (Rissanen, Kuusisto, and Kuusisto 2016; Rissanen, Kuusisto, and Tirri 2015).

## Data and methods

Principals and assistant principals of Finnish and Swedish multicultural comprehensive schools ( $n = 10$  in both countries; PS1-PS10 in Sweden, PF1-PF10 in Finland) were interviewed for this study. They worked in comprehensive schools with significant



numbers of students with immigrant backgrounds: their schools had from 10 per cent to 99 per cent students with Swedish/Finnish as their second language and significant Muslim populations, even though only the Finnish principals were able to give estimates of the number of Muslim students in their schools due to the model of religious education that divides students into different groups according to their religious affiliation. All the principals had previously worked as either subject or class-teachers and had experience of teaching in schools from 12 to 30 years; all of them had also several years' experience of serving either as principal or assistant principal. They all were either native Swedes or native Finns, and none of them was Muslim. Nine of them were males and 11 females. The study is part of a larger project where Muslim parents and teachers, who are positioned as mediators or 'cultural interpreters' in their school communities ( $n = 8$  in both countries), were also interviewed.

While this article focuses on presenting the results of the analysis of the principal data, references to the Muslim parent/teacher data are made when considered beneficial.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted on the school premises and lasted from 50 to 90 minutes. In the interviews the principals were first asked questions about their ideals of leading multicultural schools in general, then about their ideals related to dealing with religious diversity and fostering Muslim inclusion. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, English and Swedish; they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The quotes from the interviews conducted in Finnish or Swedish were translated into English by the researcher. The data was analysed using abductive qualitative content analysis (see e.g. Dubois and Gadde 2002; Elo and Kyngäs 2007). The three diversity ideologies (assimilation, multiculturalism and color-blindness) were used as analysis categories, and condensed meaning units (sentences that present principals' statements in a reduced and clarified form) were grouped under these theory-driven categories. After that, the condensed meaning units under each category were coded and sub-categories formed more inductively. After this categorization process, the prevalences of the strategies identified in dealing with different forms of diversity were analyzed, and comparisons made also between the Swedish and Finnish data. The first idea was to create types or focus more closely on the profiles of the principals; however, even though some principals were inclined towards particular diversity ideologies, they all combined multiple strategies and it was deemed more productive to focus on the ways in which the diversity ideologies vary situationally and according to different forms of diversity. The results are shown in concise form in Table 1. The categories are italicized when they appear in the text.

## Results

### *Assimilative ideology*

Assimilative ideals were based on ideals of *maintaining the majority culture* and the necessity for minorities to adapt to it. Assimilative orientation was not very common in the data; there were five principals who seemed to rely on assimilation as their main ideology. They were also more likely to express deficit beliefs about minorities. However, the majority of Swedish principals (7 out of 10), did sometimes appeal to *majority values as the basis of commonality*: most typically, they



**Table 1.** Diversity ideologies of Finnish and Swedish school principals.

Diversity ideologies		How applied to Islam and Muslims?
Assimilative ideology	<b>Maintaining the majority culture</b> -Presenting majority values as the basis of commonality -Demands for the minorities to adapt to the majority school culture -Building exclusively on the majority's cultural resources in the school culture	-Assimilation into (protestant) secular normativity
Color-blind ideology	<b>Concentrating on uniqueness:</b> -Claims about the irrelevance of diversity -Avoiding identification and categorization according to culture -Recognition and support only for individual identities <b>Concentrating on similarities:</b> -Appealing to the similarities between cultures and religions -Equality through excising all cultural elements -Learning about similarities -Supporting new common group identities	-Ignoring Islam as an identity marker -Emphasizing similarities between Islam and other religions -Excising Christian traditions from the school culture in order not to offend Muslims
Multicultural ideology	<b>Supporting minority identities:</b> -Showing interest in the backgrounds of students and their families -Building the school culture upon diverse cultural resources -Criticizing and changing the monocultural norms of the school culture. <b>Benefiting from diversities:</b> -Learning about diversities -Learning from diversities -Acquiring intercultural competences	-Validating Muslim identities -Drawing on Islamic heritage in the school culture -Rethinking secular normativity in the school -Learning from values associated with Islam and Muslim families

expressed 'Swedish values' or 'Swedish democratic values' as the basis for developing a multicultural school community and society. This is in line with the Swedish curriculum, while the ideals of the Finnish curriculum that base commonality on more multicultural grounds (Zilliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm 2017) were reflected in Finnish principals' expressions – they did not directly appeal to Finnish values or norms in a similar vein, but mentioned values attached to global citizenship or human rights as the basis of coexistence. Assimilative expressions of the *demands for the minorities to adapt to the majority school culture* most commonly took the form of demanding adaptation to the secular normativity of the school – this demand came in some form from all the principals interviewed. The most assimilative claims revealed, for instance, an understanding of detachment from religious practice (e.g. not praying during school hours), or instances where Muslim students had played elves or angels in the school's Christmas festivities 'in a similar manner to all the other students', as examples of 'successful integration'. These demands reflect a stance that could be called *religion-blindness*, which in the data of this study was commonly associated with the naturalization of the secular-Protestant world-view and culture. Few of the principals, however, promoted an ideal of *building exclusively on the majority's cultural resources in the school culture*. For those who did, an important concern was to protect and maintain Finnish or Swedish cultural (protestant) practices in the school. Some principals of segregated schools with 80–100% immigrant students and up to 40 languages spoken, regarded the cultivation of Swedish cultural practices as even more important in these schools than in schools with a native Swedish majority. However, they did consider it important for students to maintain their cultural identities but considered supporting this an

impossible task to undertake in these super-diverse schools and had chosen to emphasize ‘Swedishness’ as the most important factor of commonality.

In general, religion was the form of diversity that most commonly invited assimilative ideas. At their strongest, the assimilative claims reflected conceptions of the general incompatibility of Islam with Finnish or Swedish society:

PF7: I’ve always said that Islam needs its Martin Luther... it needs a Reformation, so that there would be no superiors, no inferiors... We need to cut the sharp edges of that religion. Like a typical Lutheran that is secularized, in a similar manner they could secularize, then these cultures could understand each other better. I think it’s crazy to come to the West thinking like, there are certain doctrines we have to...well, I do think most of the Muslims integrate well.

This principal taught in a school with over 30% immigrant students where multiculturalization of the school culture and, for instance, the school festivities, had begun. However, her essentialized understanding of ‘bad Islam’ (Schwartz 2003) reinforced her ‘secular Lutheran’ (see Poulter, Riitaaja, and Kuusisto 2016) normativity, as this quotation aptly demonstrates. Also other multiculturalist principals, who discussed other forms of diversity as assets, mentioned religion and particularly Islam as potential threats, for instance, to gender equality or children’s wellbeing. They rather explicitly expressed the need to have different diversity strategies for different forms of diversity. A Swedish principal, after discussing the importance of supporting cultural identities, said:

PS7: I think religion will always be difficult in Swedish schools, because it’s been such... a long time that it has not been there. And the question is does it need to be. Cultural diversity, yes, but religious diversity...mm...maybe not. Again, it needs to be discussed. If you have a very secular school, regardless if it’s Sweden or Norway or Denmark or Finland, you know, it needs to be clearly discussed, what are the important common grounds that we will not allow to be changed. Like equality for everyone, and like... and things that we worked really hard to achieve, those are things that we can’t give up, other things we are willing to change or willing to let go.

This principal and others with many assimilative beliefs typically regarded not shaking hands with the opposite sex as behavior that was not to be tolerated. One principal said that she demanded every parent shake hands with her, and rather interestingly, emphasized that this issue has nothing to do with religion but was a cultural matter. This is another example of religion-blindness and the way in which the principals sometimes legitimized their assimilative demands and secular normative policies by interpreting certain behavior as ‘cultural’ and, therefore, beyond the realm of religious freedom.

### **Color-blind ideology**

Color-blindness was the most prominent ideology in the data. Two distinguishable but intertwined color-blind strategies were identified: *concentrating on uniqueness* and *concentrating on similarities* (see also Rosenthal and Levy 2010). The former included strong but sometimes rather superficial *claims about the irrelevance of diversity* in the school communities: for example, stating that the fact that students or their families are Muslims was totally insignificant. These claims of the necessity to recognize students

only as individuals (e.g. ‘just ordinary kids’, ‘only teenagers with the same issues as every teenager has’), while *avoiding identification and categorization according to culture* gave an impression of color-blindness as a diversity ideology that was regarded by some principals as the most politically correct strategy and motivated by endeavors not to offend anyone; earlier research has also noted that color-blindness is a typical strategy for principals fixated on efforts to cope with their ‘white guilt’ and to avoid appearing biased (Mabokela and Madsen 2005). Color-blind ideology seemed to be based on a conviction of the reluctance of minority members to have their group affiliations or backgrounds exposed. However, in practice these color-blind strategies often resulted in minority identities being recognized only as a disadvantage. In particular, this was the case with religious diversity due to the need to make adjustments to the school culture for the sake of religious rights, which compel the community to see religion. Here are some reflections of one Swedish principal:

R: How do you feel about the relationship with Muslim parents?

PS8: I don’t really categorize them. [...] I’m not really sure about who is Muslim and who is not. Until it matters in some way.

R: What are the situations where it does matter?

PS8: Well, if there’s something that makes it really hard or difficult for that student to perform in the school.

R: What could it be?

PS8: Well, it could be. if the food issue, it could be when Ramadan sets in they need to fast. then you have to talk about it and be it hasn’t been an issue here in this school really, but I’m talking more in general. always look what’s best for the student, and how together we can reach a good solution.

This principal’s school was very diverse, but the principal was reluctant to give any estimate of the number of Muslim students because he wanted to emphasize his blindness to the students’ religious identities. He also reported that the school had tried to remove all Christian elements from its festivities.

Claims about the need to promote *recognition and support only for individual identities* were related to the view that supporting the belonging and active participation of individuals ‘regardless of their differences’ and disregarding group identities is the best means to achieve integration:

R: How does the school support the inclusion of diverse children?

PF5: They are seen as individuals, nobody makes a fuss about them but we try to support their participation and belonging in the class, and the class has to see them as who they are, unique individuals.

An important part of similarities-orientated colorblindness was *appealing to the similarities between cultures and religions*. Principals relying on this strategy referred to cultures as different reflections of common humanity and emphasized the common core of all religions, and even that there are no actual contradictions between the values of different religions. On a practical level these beliefs led the principals to emphasize *learning about similarities* in school as important means of promoting social cohesion. Emphasizing similarities and uniqueness have both been found to have positive effects on inter-group relations (e.g. Gaertner and Dovidio 2000; Aboud and Fenwick 1999). However, in this study, color-blind ideals also led the principals to promote *equality through excising all cultural elements*. This refers to the demands to remove cultural and

religious elements – also those attached to the majority culture – from the school culture, and includes *endeavors to build new inclusive group identities* by celebrating only things everyone in the school can relate to – the neighborhood, sports, aspects of youth culture or global citizenship. A problem in this is the somewhat ethnocentric conceptions of commonality. For instance, the principals assumed the participation of every student in popular youth cultures and regarded these as a good focus of school celebrations.

All principals in the data expressed some color-blind beliefs in relation to religious diversity. When dealing with other forms of diversity, color-blind ideology was somewhat less common. There were no statements in the data to indicate the application of color-blind strategy with respect to linguistic diversity; all principals regarded minority students' mother tongue classes as important, which in Finland was contrasted with negative attitudes toward religious education according to students' own religion due to it making the students' religious affiliations visible. This probably reflects the generalized understanding of multiculturalism in education in terms of language diversity (Osler and Lybaek 2014). The commonality of color-blindness as a strategy for dealing with religious diversity was much related to the ideals of banishing religion to the private sphere, common in these country contexts marked by secular protestantism (Poulter, Riitaoja, and Kuusisto 2016). The discourse around religion commonly ignored religion as an identity marker. Many principals also referred to the high level of secularization among Muslims and emphasized the 'cultural nature' of those elements that become visible in the school culture, e.g. diets – and in this way participated in the essentializing discourse on 'good' (liberal and secularized) Muslims (Mamdani 2002; Schwartz 2003). It was common that general multicultural claims of diversity as an asset were combined with religion-blind views. At the end of the interviews the principals were asked about the value and assets Muslim students and families can bring to the school. This was regarded as a 'very tricky' question or something that had never been thought about:

PS6: Mm... (long silence) Well, not because they are Muslims, no, I wouldn't say that they [contribute]. Well of course they can contribute to...nice things that our...spring concert and the autumn concert but...that is not actually because they are Muslims, it's more because they are from another country and bring some other culture thing to us.

PF10: Oh well. ...Actually I don't think it is Islam that influences how these families act and contribute but it is their culture.

PS5: Of course they can (contribute), it's no different, being a religious Muslim or being a religious Christian or being a religious Buddhist, or being religious Jewish person, you can bring as much knowledge and joy and whatever your religious upbringing is, as long as you're not extreme. So it doesn't matter what religion you have.

This religion-blind way in which the principals stated the irrelevance of contributions from religions in general, while seeing the dominant protestant tradition as cultural heritage that can be celebrated and learned from, reflects how they regard Lutheranism more as a part of Finnish or Swedish culture than a religion. Seeing Islam 'only' as a religion that must be restricted to the private sphere and relying on the color-blind strategy means these principals did not articulate any efforts to consciously counter the

stereotyping and sometimes islamophobic attitudes towards Muslims. This indicates that in this study, too, the color-blind strategy was connected to the inability to notice existing forms of marginalization, as it has been in many others (Apfelbaum et al. 2010; Touré 2008; Mabokela and Madsen 2005)

### **Multicultural ideology**

Attitude research has demonstrated that there is commonly a difference between the principles people hold and the practices they support (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). The principals in this study commonly expressed multiculturalist beliefs, but more rarely were these reflected in the school practices they promoted. There were only two principals who did not express any multiculturalist ideals; they were the ones with a marked assimilationist orientation. However, the other assimilationist principals did articulate even beautiful multiculturalist metaphors like this Swedish principal:

PS1: My personal view is that we should have interculturalism, where we try to make... what I as a former chemistry teacher would call an amalgamation, you know amalgam, when we have in our teeth mercury mixed with another metal, and they make a strong connection or they make a very strong material, but they are still mercury and another metal, that's amalgamism. That's my way of regarding multiculturalism, we should be stronger together [...] We will never be...mm...Swedish in the very traditional way again, we have a different society now.

Nevertheless, the rest of the interview made it clear that she valued immigrants as workforce but understood this interculturalism in terms of the dominant majority learning how to tolerate and minorities learning to relate to their own culture 'with flexibility'. There were also principals who more consistently endorsed multicultural ideology, i.e. that equality and social cohesion are best promoted by learning from diversities rather than by ignoring them (Rattan and Anbady 2013). Two main categories of multiculturalist ideology were identified: *supporting minority identities* and *benefiting from diversities*. In the former category, multiculturalism was presented mainly as a strategy beneficial for minorities and protecting their identities, in the latter as the benefit of everyone. The former were more common, which reflects the common European/Nordic understanding of immigrant students as representatives of the 'multicultural' – and indicates also that the spirit of the Finnish curriculum, which counters this understanding, had not been completely internalized by the Finnish principals (Zilliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm 2017). The category included claims about the importance of *showing interest in the backgrounds of students and their families*, based on a conviction that minorities want their group-identities and backgrounds to be recognized. Showing interest was the 'mildest' form of identity support and implemented by most of the principals. Some principals deemed it important to *build the school culture upon diverse cultural resources*. Many had tried different multicultural theme weeks in the school, others also wanted to 'multiculturalize' the school culture more permanently. Raising the profiles of different cultures was clearly a more common ideal for the Finnish principals – eight of them, while only two Swedish principals expressed these claims: in general, color-blindness was stronger among the latter. The higher degree of secular normativity of the Swedish school context was evident. For instance,

several Finnish principals but none of the Swedish ones had planned to include some form of Eid al-Fitr celebrations in the schools. Here it is important also to note perspectives from the Muslim parent and teacher data. The ideas of validating different religious identities by building upon heritage from different religious traditions in the school were met ambivalently by many ‘Muslim mediators’ in the communities. Here is what one Finnish Islamic education teacher (and a Muslim mother) said:

This is a very tricky issue. I think that it is very easy for those who belong to the native majority to say let’s celebrate everything and every religion should be able to be visibly present, but that’s not necessarily supported by the minorities themselves. Like, we have schools that have this theme year when they celebrate festivities from different religions and...well, our Muslim community is not yet in a mental state that this would be ok for everyone. They experience this as being forced upon them, like if there are Eid celebrations you have to let your kids participate in the Christmas celebrations, too. And I think there are no simple solutions for this, we are now going through a kind of a critical period, anyway.

This was something none of the principals reflected upon when talking about their multicultural ideology.

However, in both countries there were principals who went further than the ‘contributions approach’ (see e.g. Agirdag, Merry & Van Houtte 2016) in incorporating diversity, and *criticized and changed the monocultural norms of the school culture*, in order to make it more inclusive. An important part of this for many was to employ multicultural staff. Only one principal in the data expressed the need also to consider critically the secular normativity of the school:

PS2: If schools don’t open up to different cultures and different thoughts, then schools will enhance segregation instead of working to level it out. So I think we have a really big role to open up to different religious thoughts and make it a part of school as well. Instead of saying, we are a secular administration, so...instead saying, we are a place where all religions have their own place [...] instead of being so afraid. Because there’s almost anxiety about religion...

This principal had worked in very different schools as a teacher and seen the impact of different school policies on those students. Planning the everyday life of the school in a way that no ‘exceptions’ needed to be made to cater for the needs of the minorities was part of his norm-critical approach. Even though he was in charge of a school with only under 20% Muslim students, he, for instance, planned the weekly school schedule in a way that enabled Muslim students’ participation in Friday prayers at the mosque.

Sometimes multiculturalist ideology was also argued for as a benefit for everyone. *Learning about diversities* was commonly regarded as important for members of both minorities and majority. However, *learning from diversities*, a category that presumed the recognition and affirmation of different cultures as valuable, contained statements from fewer principals. ‘Mutual learning’ was a commonly mentioned principle, but its poor internalization was revealed by the difficulties principals faced when asked to describe more precisely what they actually thought could be learned from (and not only about) the minority cultures present in the school. This was particularly the case with Islam (as presented above). However, some principals did recognize particular contributions of Muslim families to the school:



PF8: One thing that often shows is respect for adults. We have lost this a bit in Finland. So this is what sometimes shows, and in some situations it is a particularly valuable asset. And particularly among Muslims you can see that big sisters and brothers often take care of their siblings, and if there are other relatives of theirs in the school they often look after those also. And also the kind of...genuity and caring, very courageously showing that we care, we belong together, kind of...bringing the communality here. What else. Well, of course, there is much appreciation for education, the idea that education is for the future.

They often mentioned the same things: 1) family and communal values that also help to build the school as a community, 2) good manners, politeness and respect for authority 3) respect for school and knowledge and understanding the need for hard work and 4) fewer problems with alcohol and drugs. It is noteworthy that these issues were raised by principals from low socio-economic areas with many refugee families as well as a principal who led an international school whose students came mainly from high SES families. However, there were also those principals who regarded this question as unnecessary and stereotyping, since Muslims in the school are a heterogeneous group. This was to be expected, but also related to the fact that there were no efforts by these principals to counter the negative stereotypes attached to Muslims.

However, most commonly the benefit of diversity was seen in that it makes it possible to develop the school as a productive environment for *acquiring intercultural competences*. Thus, according to these interviews, the most important contribution of immigrant students to the school community is that they build a learning environment where all students can ‘internationalize’ and develop global citizenship skills. These views of principals align with the observations of scholars who have shown how tolerance, open and broad cultural tastes have become symbols of social status and cultural capital. Desire for this multicultural capital (also powered by white guilt) plays a role in the school choices of white middle-class parents, who decide to send their children to culturally diverse schools (Reay et al. 2007). Mostly the principals of this study discussed the learning opportunities for (majority) students, but a few also contemplated their own cultural learning or the development of critical self-awareness. In general, the principals rarely articulated multiculturalism as a strategy to fight against the existing educational inequalities – more likely, for them, inclusion seemed to remain an issue of politeness and goodwill rather than a question of social justice or a strategy to close the achievement gaps. Furthermore, multiculturalist ideology was rarely applied as a strategy for dealing with religious diversity. There were principals who emphasized recognition and affirmation of cultural identities in the school but had very negative attitudes towards the validation of religious identities.

## Discussion

This study analyzed Finnish and Swedish principals’ diversity ideologies and how these are implemented, in particular, in supporting the inclusion of Muslim students. Assimilative ideology, in general, received the least support from the principals. This can be regarded a positive result, for assimilation tends to increase minorities’ defensive reactions and ingroup bias and is not a very promising approach for promoting social cohesion (Verkuyten 2010).



However, assimilative claims were more common concerned religious diversity and calling for assimilation into the secular normativity of the school. Color-blindness emerged as the most commonly endorsed ideology, and also as the strategy most commonly applied to Islam and Muslims.

Multicultural ideals were expressed in some form by most of the principals but were frequently superficially internalized. Multicultural ideology was rarely implemented in promoting the inclusion of Muslims. When it was, it related to endeavors to build upon Islamic heritage in the school culture, validating Muslim identities and learning from values subscribed by Muslim families. However, understanding Islam as mainly a threat to integration was both implicitly and explicitly articulated by the principals. These views concur with common European discourses on the threats religion poses to integration, which contrast with discourses in US based studies where the religions of immigrants are commonly perceived as potential resources in integration processes (Foner and Alba 2008). In general, the study found that principals' diversity ideologies varied with respect to different forms of diversity. Language diversity was more commonly dealt with through multicultural ideology than religious diversity – a finding which contrasts with that of Agirdag et al. (2016) in Flanders.

Secular normativity is fostered in the educational systems of both countries of this study but with greater emphasis in Sweden than in Finland. The Swedish principals almost completely omitted Islam from the multiculturalist discourse, while in Finland the system of religious education according to students' religious affiliation, based on the positive interpretation of religious freedom in Finland, compels the principals to *see* Muslims. However, what seemed to underlie principals' diversity strategies in both countries is religion-blindness, which appeared as naturalization of secular-Protestant worldview and culture, views emphasizing the irrelevance of religious identities in educational settings, lack of recognition for the contributions from religious traditions, as well as strategic interpretations of certain behaviors as 'cultural' and beyond the realm of religious freedom. In a manner similar to that in which color-blindness is recognized as a form of racism that bolsters the normative identity of majorities and is blind to discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2015), the aspects of religion-blindness observed in this study fail to counter the stigma attached to Muslim identities and rather than contributing to the fight against Islamophobia, become part of it. The mainstream scholarly approaches to increasing equality in education have abandoned color-blindness as an ineffective strategy (e.g. Nieto and Bode 2008; Gay 2010), but they are silent about religion-blindness.

Nevertheless, given the social psychological research results on the shortcomings of also multicultural ideology, its implications in educational settings need to be carefully elucidated. The risks of multicultural ideology are that it sometimes leads to further stereotyping (Wolsko et al. 2000; Wolsko, Park, and Judd 2006), fails to increase empathy towards outgroups and increases perceptions of diversity as disturbing (Vorauer and Sasaki 2010). While multicultural recognition does seem to have favorable effects on feelings of self-worth for minority members who have a positive and secure identity and high ethnic self-esteem, it is experienced as uncomfortable by those who do not identify strongly with their group (Verkuyten 2009). Furthermore, in contexts where high levels of prejudices prevail, the targets of prejudices might prefer to avoid expressions of difference as the best strategy to prevent conflicts (Rattan and

Anbady 2013). The principals in this study had rather black and white perceptions on whether the recognition of different group identities was to be avoided or promoted, and reflexivity over the complexity of the issue was lacking. Research has also shown that multicultural ideology predicts more positive responses to stereotypical minority members, and color-blind ideology to counterstereotypical ones; thus, color-blindness may lead the members of the dominant group to dislike members of minorities wishing to express their cultural identities while multiculturalist majority members would feel the same way about those who are not willing to do so (Gutierrez and Unzueta 2010). This tendency was also apparent in the present study, where empathy towards students or staff members reluctant to be seen as Muslims was strong, and avoidance of religionizing treatment a common concern.

Any criticism of the different diversity ideals is dubious if it is not informed by the minorities' own voices. Studies have demonstrated that the 'over-visibility' of Muslim identity sometimes violates the feelings of belonging and ability to participate, but hurt is also caused by the invisibility of Muslim identity in situations where it is relevant and could be positively recognized. In contexts experienced as islamophobic, some Muslims struggle with the experienced need to promote positive recognition of Islam and exhaustion over assuming the task of being the 'positive example' Muslim, and for these reasons sometimes prefer religious anonymity (Hopkins and Blackwood 2011; Rissanen 2018). Furthermore, as discussed in this study, all Muslim or members of other religious minorities are not necessarily ready for the demands of mutual recognition and celebration of religious diversity that multicultural educational approaches would encourage; some prefer having a strictly secular school and regarding religion as a private matter, even though this also means there would be no official-level validation of Muslim identities in the school. There were big differences among the principals in this study with respect to their willingness to give minorities agency to negotiate these terms of recognition (see also Rissanen 2018).

The results of this study have implications for both educational practice and further studies. The silence surrounding religion in scholarly frameworks of multicultural education should be broken. Moreover, discussions on the incorporation of different forms of diversity in education should not be detached from context. In the two Nordic countries in this study, with very many similarities regarding history, demographics and multicultural policies, some important differences in principals' thinking emerged, and the origins of these differences are traceable to some features in conceptions of religious freedom and differences in the curricula. More comparative research could be conducted to see how these differences influence the educational experiences of Muslims and other religious minorities. Furthermore, the competences principals and teachers need in the complex attempt to incorporate religious diversity in their schools also remains an under-researched topic. The results of this study suggest that what is needed is an understanding of religion as an identity marker and possible reason for exclusion. Discussions on the grounds and implications of religion-blindness and the secular normativity of the schools are needed, and they need to connect to the wider societal discussions on the public role of religion. The results also suggest that education professionals need a finely nuanced understanding of the implications of different diversity strategies and a sensitivity in their implementation with situational variation and flexibility. In educational settings where prejudices prevail, it may be beneficial to

regard the development of educational equality and social cohesion as a process during which educators estimate in which ways affirmation of diversity can be promoted without risking an increase in negative stereotypes, identity threats or discrimination. The color-blind cultivation of commonality and uniqueness could play a part at the level of everyday educational practices laying the foundations for inclusion, and be followed by the validation of minority identities in unison with efforts at challenging stereotypes and existing forms of marginalization. However, this should not be taken as a legitimization of the naturalization of the majority identity in a way that upholds blindness to its privileges: while the celebration of minority identities can be approached with some caution, endorsing self-critical attitudes among majorities and renouncing the neutrality of their positions has never hurt anyone. Furthermore, at a more structural level there is very little need for color-blindness: the true indicator of Muslim inclusion is the agency of different Muslim groups to negotiate the governance of diversity in educational settings and the terms of their inclusion.

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